

King's Student Perspectives

Law

Brioni, 3rd year
March 2013

What attracted you to Law?

I have to admit that I wanted to study law initially because I wanted to be a lawyer, which is not actually a good reason to do a law degree. Then, when I researched the subject as an academic discipline and looked at what the course would involve, I wanted to study law because it lies behind or regulates pretty much everything we do, and I thought that it would be a really broad, varied and interesting subject to explore at university level.

I studied a few controversial law

cases during my A level Law course, and I found it to be a much more thought-provoking subject than anything else I was doing in sixth form. I liked the idea of taking a subject at university which would be a challenge and also give me a lot of choice in the topics I could study.

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What drew you to Cambridge/King's?

Like many other people, the kudos of going to Cambridge was a major factor in my initial decision to apply: why would you not apply to one of the best institutions in the world? It is amazing to have the opportunity to study at Cambridge – the people who write your textbooks are the same people who supervise you in small groups, so you can be sure that you are getting the best teaching. This is a centre of excellence, and I think that anyone who has a real interest in their subject and has been dedicated to working hard at school and achieving the high grades needed for entry will be drawn to this institution.

When it came to colleges, I chose King's because I came to look round a few colleges, and when I walked through King's I decided that this was a

I think that everyone loves the college they end up at.



Brioni (4th from right) with King's friends at Christmas formal Hall

place I could see myself walking through every day. I have not regretted the decision! I think that everyone loves the college they end up at, but the best way to decide where to go is to walk through the grounds and see if you can see yourself being happy there, for whatever reason. I think that King's is one of the most friendly and open colleges here, however I didn't know that when I applied, of course.

How is studying at Cambridge different to school?

My least favorite thing about school was having to study subjects I was not really interested in. Studying at university level is great because you get to really specialise and focus on the subject you have chosen as your personal area of interest.

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The workload at Cambridge is a lot bigger than it was at my sixth form college. While you get a lot of academic and pastoral support as a student here, ultimately it is up to you to take an interest in the material and motivate yourself to get the work done. Unlike school, where you will be taught everything you need to know in classes, and will certainly go through everything needed for the exams with the teachers, at Cambridge you have to take the initiative to do extra reading and thinking, as you always need to find that something to make your work stand out.

We have lectures, of course, but they only really cover the bare minimum of what you need to know, and you are expected to read core textbooks, cases and academic writings to extend your knowledge and interests further, and to develop your own thoughts on the topics being discussed.

What is the teaching like?

Supervisions, as we call them, are one of the great things about studying at Oxbridge. These are frequent small group or one-to-one sessions with experts in your field and you'll soon realise that they are invaluable. At first, I found it quite nerve-wracking to be in a room with a few extremely clever people, trying to make a sensible contribution to the discussion. However, as soon as I got used to having supervisions, I found that they are a really interesting way of learning.

Often we won't cover all of the basics in one supervision, but will focus on something particularly controversial or novel. The best supervisions are ones where everyone is contributing and interested in the topic being discussed. I've found that in the more policy-based discussions in particular, everyone just bounces ideas off each other, and as a result you get to use the material in ways you've not previously thought of. This is great practice for thinking about questions in exams and gives you lots of new ideas which you can use in your future work.

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In first year you have four supervisions a fortnight, then

in second and third year there are five a fortnight. I think that on top of going to lectures, I spend around twenty hours on each supervision, however realistically some take more and some take less time, depending on my interest in the topic and how easy I find it. It is perfectly feasible to do less than this if you're having a busy week. Supervisors understand if

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you're struggling and haven't done more than the core reading, however you are expected to catch up afterwards. Equally, if you find a particular subject area interesting, there is always scope to focus on that as reading lists can be as long as you wish them to be!



The Law Faculty – you are taught in the faculty alongside law students from all colleges.

If you choose to do a dissertation in your third year as I did, then you will go to two-hour seminars in the faculty once a week. My seminar is on Criminal Law and Ethics, and there are nine of us who take part. In first term we looked at different areas of the criminal law, then in second term everyone presents their dissertation to the seminar group for comments and advice. Seminars are like a big supervision but without the core reading as everyone is doing different dissertations. The discussion can get just as heated as in supervisions though! We have debated whether it is worse to run over your mother negligently, or to intentionally steal someone's snickers (all but one agreed that it's better to intentionally steal the snickers), and

whether it is justified for the state to ban British citizens from eating pizza and drinking alcohol in the interests of safeguarding our own welfare (we all enthusiastically agreed that we have a right to eat pizza!)

What about other aspects of College life?

Lawyers tend to sit with their college friends in lectures, and I have to say that don't know the people from other colleges I'm supervised with particularly well. It varies a bit from person to person, but because my extra-curricular activities are all based in King's, I meet people from other colleges less than some other students. In my first year I made friends from other colleges because I was on a law society committee, however. It depends what you do, but generally people's closest friends are from

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within their college, which is hardly surprising given that everyone lives together. A ten-minute walk to another college quickly starts to feel like an epic trek!

At any university there will be times where things aren't going well. You may be homesick, have financial problems, have work problems... the list is inexhaustive. I have made so many amazing friends in King's who will drop everything if needed despite



Brioni (left) at the King's Affair



Meals are a good time to catch up with college friends

being busy, whether this is for a cup of tea or to take me to A&E (don't ask!).

Living in a college means that you see your friends all of the time and will have a very wide range of friends from all backgrounds, years and subjects. There is always someone around (probably in the bar) to have a general moan to. I find the mix of subjects in College useful, as if I'm struggling with work-related problems, I don't

always want to talk to other law students!

I have also found that having extra-curricular activities that have nothing to do with work (rowing and running in my case) can be really helpful. These interests give you down-time to relax, and you will probably have a completely different set of friends connected to your hobbies.

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What papers do lawyers take?

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All students at Cambridge must study the seven core modules which law students at every UK institution will study. In the first year, everyone studies Criminal law, Tort law, Constitutional law, and Roman law. All four are compulsory, although Roman law is the only one which is particular to Cambridge – it is the sort of course that you either love or hate, but either way, it makes for some interesting 'bar-chat' knowledge! In second year all students study Land law and Contract law, and I also chose International law, Administrative law and Criminology, Sentencing and the Penal system.

This year (third year) all students are studying Equity (Trusts) and European law, then for my options, I have also chosen Jurisprudence, Intellectual Property and I am doing a dissertation on the criminalisation of Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide. Most students do not do a dissertation, however they are a fantastic option for people like me who hate exams, as you finish working on it a few weeks before exams and then have the advantage of having one less subject to study in those all-important final weeks!



King's avenue (leading to the back gate) in recent cold weather - this is the way to the Law Faculty.

If you want to do a dissertation, you choose from a few broad subject areas such as Criminal law, Public law or Women and the law, and you are then fairly free to choose what title to propose, which may then be selected. This year dissertation titles range from Pirates to Euthanasia, and from Corporate liability to prisoners' voting rights.

What kinds of things do you struggle with?

I love studying law and I love being a student at Cambridge but the work can be extremely hard, and the workload itself is not easy! I particularly struggled with the workload at the beginning - I often felt like I just had pages and pages of notes which were devoid of meaning, and I would never know if I was going to get things done and meet my deadlines. While the

workload gets bigger over the years, the

good news is that you definitely get better at working and at organising your work. The work I did in my first year would take me a considerably shorter amount of time if I approached it now, and although I have more work this year than before, I also manage it much better.

My first work strategy is organisation: now I use a calendar, and I have learnt to write at the beginning of each fortnight what work I will do on which days. I can factor in sport and those all-important nights out etc, and

being organised means that I don't miss deadlines or have weekly panics about work. I don't have times when I have to sit in the library all night, and I know in advance what I need to do to meet deadlines without being stressed out. Discipline is important, as there are no magic tips to getting through the work, you just have to sit and get on with it. So while the work gets harder through the course in some respects, it definitely gets easier in others: it is all about time management and organisation. My top tip would be to try to be organised from the start, and not decide in your final year that this is a great idea!

The second advantage of being further on in the course is that reading textbooks and cases also gets much easier over time. You get a feel for what the important part of a case is, and which bits of a textbook need more or less attention. This is just about being better at working, which comes with experience.



King's College Library



The Squire Law Library a few minutes away, at the Faculty

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I think that what I find most difficult now, is balancing everything that I want to do, especially as it is my last year at Cambridge. The workload is manageable although big, but I also want to row, to run regularly, see my friends and take advantage of the many opportunities that Cambridge offers, such as interesting talks and fun events. Again, this is just about being organised but I admit that I tend to be a little too optimistic with how much I can do in a week! My advice is to take advantage of every opportunity over the three years you are here so that you don't feel like you have to cram it all in during your final year, when you know you should probably be writing your dissertation.

What is your timetable like?

The timetable for a law student is very relaxed. I have nine lectures, one two-hour seminar, and two supervisions a week. Most students have five supervisions a fortnight but as I am doing a dissertation, I have less contact time. This timetable works well for me as I like working late at night, but some people prefer a more structured day. The teaching for law allows your timetable to be really flexible so it is very easy to get into a routine which suits you, whatever that might be.

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However you like to organise your days, law is a book-heavy course and you need to put the hours in. This is just my opinion, but from what I've seen, the number of hours you work and your performance in exams are strongly correlated. If you don't think that you will have the discipline to work hard then Cambridge is probably not the university for you. However, while law is a tough subject, there is a general culture here of working hard, which really helps you to make a lot of progress if you're keen to do the course. It's not like your friends will be going out every night while you're in the library - you'll all be in it together!

There is a general culture here of working hard, which really helps.

When you're not studying, there are hundreds of sporting activities, political groups / societies, and law societies that you can join. Whatever you want to try here you will be able to do.

I have found time to row, which I do four times a week. I did a lot of coaching on top of this in my second year as I was vice-captain of the boat club. This year I am secretary of the boat club. I have always had time to



Dressed up for King's Boat Club dinner (Brioni is second from right)

try the things I really want to do, and of course, these activities really help you with job applications!

Unfortunately vacations aren't really vacations - you have to work even in your first year, which is partly due to terms being so short (eight weeks) so you need to catch up. However, to compensate for this, we have almost four months off in the summer, so we can't really complain!



(c) David Ponting

Brioni's crew on the river (purple is the King's colour)

How are you assessed?

Law is an examination subject. There is no coursework in the first two years, so it's all down to end of year exams. Exam term is very stressful, but everyone will say that, for every subject. If you are considering applying to Cambridge, the chances are that at every university you apply to, exam term will be stressful. In the first year there are four three-hour exams, then five three-hour exams in the second year, and five in the third year (unless you do a dissertation which means you only do four exams).

Exams are awful, but Cambridge makes up for it with 'May Week' afterwards, which is a week of balls, wearing black tie and gowns, sitting by the river with a bottle of Pimms, and catching up on the TV you missed during term time!

How did you find the application process?

As a third year who also took a gap year, it is a while since I applied and perhaps I am not in the best position to talk about the application

process as I know that it has changed. However, I can give a few general pointers:

When you're choosing a college, it is worth knowing that it really does not matter which college you are at - you will benefit from the same lecturers and academics because you are taught both at college and at university level. So you are free to choose the college you want to go to for whatever reason.

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Brioni (on the right in black) enjoying a well-deserved break after the exam period, at the King's Funday

I think that King's law is extremely relaxed by comparison with other colleges. I am quite a competitive person but I have to say that King's is not very competitive at all. Students here enjoy sharing and discussing their ideas, and are generous in helping each other, which is really useful when you're stuck and need help, or if you need to borrow a book! I have friends at other colleges with more law students, but I honestly think the atmosphere to study law at King's is better – I appreciate the supportive environment here and it helps me to work well. Additionally, our library will buy the books you need so you don't have to buy books (look at the price of law textbooks and you will see how important this is – especially due to the frequency of new editions).

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Then there's the question of preparation and school subjects. I studied A level law which was useful for me because it sparked my interest in law, however I don't really think there is a particular advantage for the course in studying or not studying law at school. Some people say universities hate it, others say you can't demonstrate an interest for law if you have turned down the opportunity to study it. I think that if you can demonstrate that you have the intellectual ability and a genuine interest to study law, then whether you have the A level is irrelevant – so just take the A levels you want to do and think that you will do well in.

In terms of substantive usefulness, it is neither harmful nor helpful to have A level law; we do cover the course, but in about two weeks and in much more detail! Equally, if you're thinking about having relevant work experience as part of your university application, this may serve to show your interest in law but remember that they are not interested in why you want to be a

practicing lawyer – they want to know why you want to study law as an academic subject!

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Be yourself at the interview.

The personal statement for your application should be personal. This sounds obvious, but don't write what you think your potential Director of Studies wants to read. Really, they

just want to get to know you and see how interesting you are. Similarly, really be yourself at the interview. Again, they want to get to know you and see how you would work in supervisions, which is about how you deal with answering unforeseen questions or approaching new issues on the spot. The interview probably won't be easy, but it should be thought-provoking, and you want your interviewers to think you are interesting, so try to relax and be creative!



*I suggest that prospective lawyers keep up to date with what is going on in the world of law and generally in the world, just because you will always get brownie points for citing something interesting and novel! Finally, it goes without saying that if you say in your personal statement that you have read *Eve Was Framed* or *Learning the Law* by Glanville Williams, you should probably read them before the interview!*

What will you do after you graduate?

A definite perk of being a law student is that we are very employable, and a huge advantage of being a law society member is that you find out about internships, pathways into careers (both legal and non legal), and higher education. The law faculty is also brilliant at advertising work placements, vacation schemes and mini pupilages, and the University has a great careers service. If you don't know what you want to do, or alternatively if you know absolutely where you want to be but don't know quite what to do to get there, then there is a lot of support while you're here for finding relevant summer placements and accessing good careers advice.

The options are pretty varied.

While in the run up to exams most of my third year friends in other subjects will be panicking about getting employment after the course, I, like many other law students, already have a job lined up with an amazing firm. I did a couple of vacation schemes (internships) in the summer between my second and third year with law

firms in London, and signed a contract before the start of the academic year. They are even paying for me to go to law school! This is fairly common, as is joining the bar. However it isn't just about becoming a lawyer: another student in my year at King's did an internship with Amnesty International over the summer and will be doing a masters in the US, and another has a job with an accountancy firm, so the options are pretty varied.

Is a gap year worth considering?

Yes! I took one, and whether before or after university, I can definitely recommend it if you're at all interested. Even if you don't have the travel bug, it's an opportunity to go out and find it, or to go and do something you have always wanted to do, whether this is feeding cuddly animals in a conservation site in Africa, singing on a cruise ship for a year or working in industry for a few months.

I did Camp America then travelled through the southern states, worked at home then worked for a Human Rights Law NGO in Ghana for a few months before travelling in West Africa. My gap year was one of the best years of my life, I met



On a child trafficking outreach in Obuasi, Ghana.

some amazing people, and it definitely helped me to grow up before university. Everything I did also helped on my CV and gave me something to talk about in interviews other than my degree – personally, I don't think I would have got the job that I have lined up without my gap year experience!

A note to current King's Law students

If you would like to write about your experiences of studying

Law at King's for our prospective students to read, please email Kristy in the Admissions Office for further details: undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk



(c) David Ponting

King's WI in the "Bumps" race – chasing the boat ahead and chased by the boat behind.